

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Connecticut
before the Judiciary Committee**

March 11, 2013

IN SUPPORT OF

**Proposed House Bill 6581: AAC the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission
Regarding Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed by a Child or Youth**

**Proposed Senate Bill 1062: AAC the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission
Regarding the Sentencing of a Child Convicted of a Felony Offense**

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Sara Frankel and I am the *Public Policy Director for Children, Youth and Young Adults* with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups across the state, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals who actually live with mental illness and parents and family members of individuals living with mental illness. I am here today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut to testify in support of both HB 6518 and SB 1062.

HB 6581 provides parole eligibility rules tailored for juveniles. Individuals serving sentences of more than 10 years for crimes that occurred before they turned 18 would have an opportunity to be heard by a parole board after serving a substantial portion of their sentences. Release would not be guaranteed but would be possible only if, after thorough review, the parole board determined that a person had truly rehabilitated and could be safely released. SB 1062 eliminates mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles and allows judges to consider youth-related factors in sentencing juveniles transferred to adult court.

We know that many of the behaviors that lead children and youth to commit crimes – especially impulsive, risk-taking behaviors and behaviors involving peer pressure—are all too often the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs. About a quarter of all children have an emotional-behavioral disorder. However, research shows that between 70 to 80 percent of children and adolescents with a diagnosable mental illness fail to receive mental health services.¹ Implementing parole eligibility rules tailored for juveniles and eliminating mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles will provide an opportunity for the justice

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.

system to take into consideration the mental health status of offenders. Implementing parole eligibility rules tailored for juveniles will also allow the justice system to consider whether those offenders with mental health conditions have had an opportunity to seek rehabilitation and treatment while serving a portion of their sentences.

There is also well-established scientific evidence showing that adolescents have underdeveloped brains that make them more susceptible to peer pressure than adults and a lacking in foresight, both of which can lead to involvement with crime. Furthermore, multiple studies indicate that approximately 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system meet criteria for at least one mental health disorder. Among those youth in the juvenile justice system with a mental health diagnosis, 60% also met criteria for a substance use disorder.² However, youth can overcome mental health obstacles. Youth are resilient and have a greater capacity to change for the better, even though they may have experienced psychological harm.

For the above reasons, NAMI Connecticut supports HB 6581 and SB 1062. Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

² *Youth with Mental Health Disorders in the Juvenile Justice System: Results from a Multi-State Prevalence Study*, Jennie Shufelt, M.S. & Joseph Cocozza, Ph.D. 2006.